



Educating Our Kids in order to Break the Cycle of Poverty

Children are expected to arrive at kindergarten able to sit still and pay attention during class time, resolve conflicts with their classmates, and follow simple directions. They have an advantage if they are familiar with basic language and vocabulary, if they enjoy hearing stories and being read to, and if they have some knowledge about letters and numbers. These basic skills allow them to participate effectively and increase the likelihood that they will thrive in school and beyond.^{1,2}

Children in poverty are less likely than middle-class children to develop these skills before kindergarten.^{3,4} Too often, poor children have fewer early learning experiences^{5,6} than their better-off peers. For example, poor and low-income children tend to live in homes with fewer books and less language stimulation.⁷

As a result, they are likely to fall behind when school begins.^{3,5,8-10} Some research indicates that poor and low-income children arrive at kindergarten already a full year behind other children on cognitive measures.¹¹ These differences in kindergarten readiness translate into later academic struggles, high school dropout, adult difficulties finding work, and poorer health.¹²⁻¹⁹

Breaking this cycle of poverty in Memphis requires investing in our youngest children and ensuring that they have nurturing and enriching early experiences, including high-quality early care and educational opportunities. The earliest years of life are a period of rapid brain development. Young children's brains are creating the vital early connections that form the basis of learning how to use language and numbers, how to control their emotions, and how to get along with others—the essential ingredients of school readiness.²⁰

For children to arrive at kindergarten well prepared, they need parents and educators in their lives who support their early learning. Preschool and home learning help prepare children for kindergarten, regardless of their background.

Education starts in the home.

Children are born learning! Preparing for school starts in the first days of life by nourishing a child's natural curiosity. In optimal home learning environments, parents develop strong bonds with their children, engage in educational activities with them, and provide books and other learning materials.^{21,22}

Young children who grow up in high-quality learning environments are better able to develop emerging cognitive skills, such as early literacy and numeracy skills.²³⁻²⁵ These early skills, in turn, are connected to better reading and math

skills in elementary school.^{24,26,27}

Since language development and reading are fundamental to all areas of learning, one of the most important things parents can do with their children is read to them regularly.⁵ Introducing children to books and reading fosters their ability to learn more easily in formal school settings.²⁸ When it comes to reading with young children, more is better. Reading at least once each a week promotes early reading achievement.²⁹ Most experts recommend that parents read to children daily!

Middle-income parents read to their children more often than low-income parents.

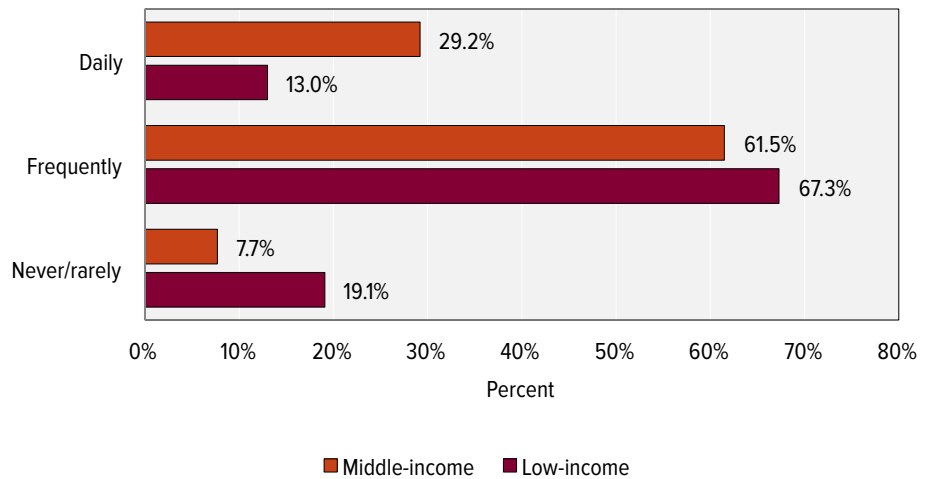
In the 2010 Census, 53 percent of parents nationwide reported reading to their toddlers at least seven times a week and 49 percent reported reading to their preschoolers seven or more times each week. Among low-income families, these numbers drop to 45 and 40 percent, respectively.³⁰ Young children in Memphis are read to less than national averages.

At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, 389 parents of kindergarten students at five

Memphis City Schools (MCS) were asked about their families' early childhood reading practices. The good news is that about two-thirds reported reading to their children several times each week. At the same time, only 29 percent of middle-income parents and 13 percent of low-income parents reported reading to their children daily. Alarming, 19 percent of low-income parents reported that they never or rarely read to their children (FIGURE 1).

FIGURE 1:
How Often Does Someone in Your Home Read a Young Children's Book With Your Child?

Source: Memphis City Schools (MCS), Office of Research & Evaluation, Pre-K data, 2011-2012



Frequently: 1-2 times a week or almost daily
Never/rarely: Never or 1-2 times a month

Middle-income parents are more comfortable reading to their children than low-income parents.

Why might so few parents in Memphis read to their children daily? While chaotic and stressful lives can sometimes get in the way of reading with young children, parents' own reading abilities could be another influence. According to Literacy Mid-South, over 120,000 adults in Memphis cannot read or write.³¹ However, most

parents of new kindergarteners reported that they enjoy reading to their children.

As FIGURE 2 shows, middle-income parents were more comfortable reading than low-income parents.

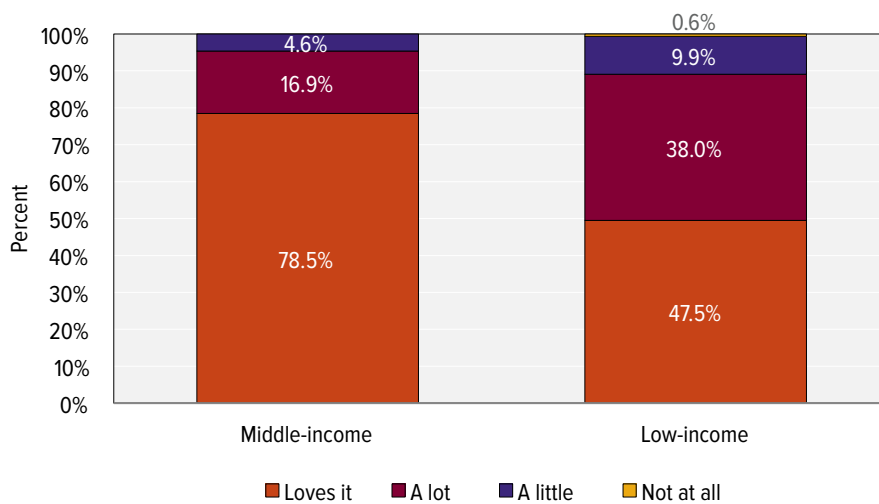


FIGURE 2:
How Comfortable
Are you Reading to
Your Child?

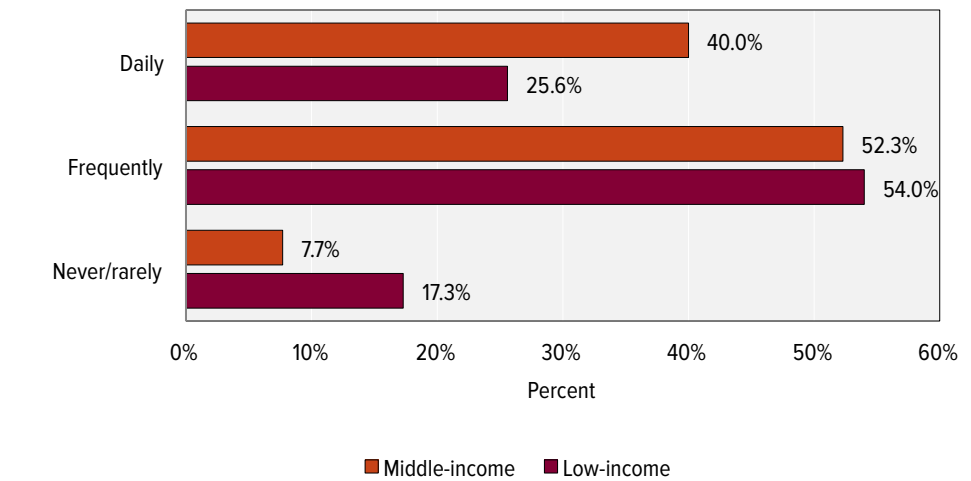
Source: Memphis City
Schools (MCS), Office of
Research & Evaluation,
Pre-K data, 2011-2012

Middle-income children show more interest in reading than low-income children.

Similar patterns of reading behavior were found when parents reported how often their kindergarten children asked to be read to or looked at books alone. Among middle-income children, 40 percent asked someone to read to them each day, whereas only a 26 percent of low-income children did so (FIGURE 3). Just over 46 percent of middle-income children and 38 percent of low-income children looked at books by themselves daily (FIGURE 4).

FIGURE 3:
How Often Does Your Child Ask to be Read To?

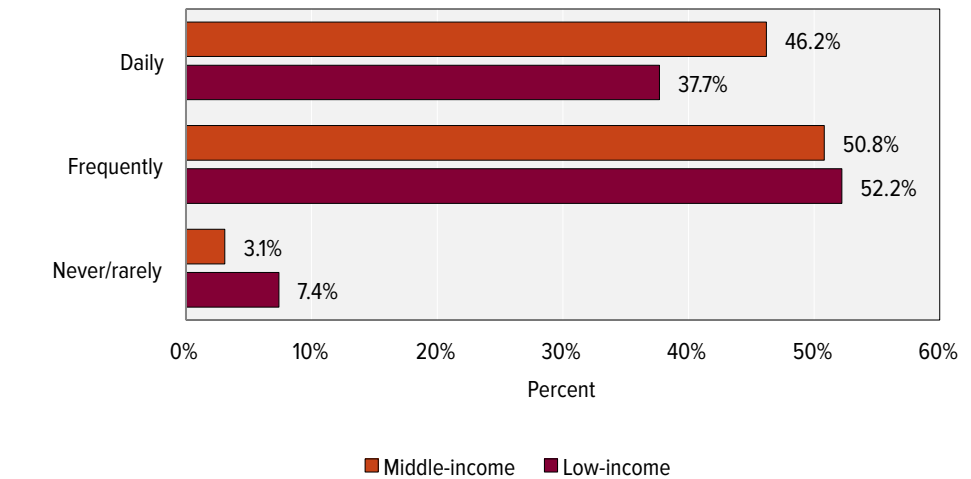
Source: Memphis City Schools (MCS), Office of Research & Evaluation, Pre-K data, 2011-2012



Frequently: 1-2 times a week or almost daily
Never/rarely: Never or 1-2 times a month

FIGURE 4:
How Often Does Your Child Look at Books by Him/ Herself?

Source: Memphis City Schools (MCS), Office of Research & Evaluation, Pre-K data, 2011-2012



Frequently: 1-2 times a week or almost daily
Never/rarely: Never or 1-2 times a month

Middle-income parents believe their children like being read to more than low-income parents.

We also see a strong income-based difference in the degree to which parents believe their children enjoy reading. 92 percent of middle-income parents believe their children really enjoy reading, compared to only 76 percent of low-income parents (FIGURE 5).

Although many children in our community are developing a healthy interest in reading and books, the evidence indicates that there are income differences in attitudes toward reading. Low-income kindergarteners and their parents were less likely to read than their middle-income counterparts.

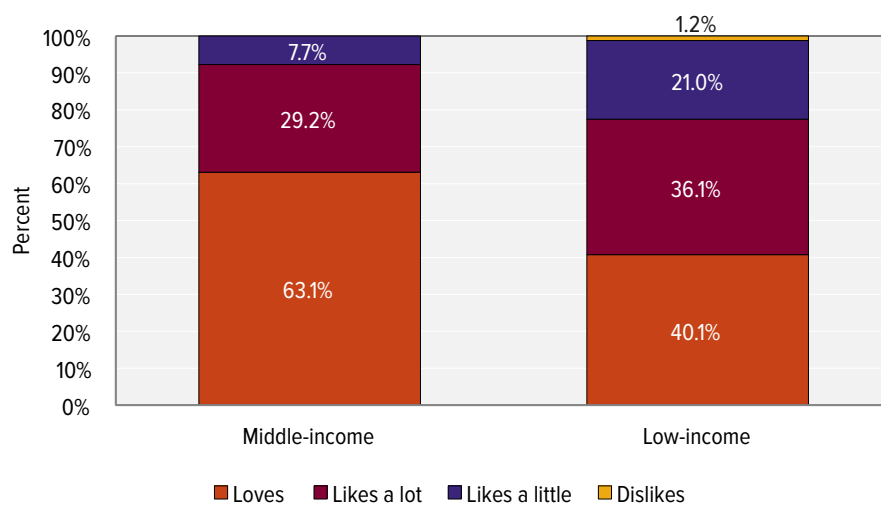


FIGURE 5:
How Much Does
Your Child Like
Being Read To?

Source: Memphis City
Schools (MCS), Office of
Research & Evaluation,
Pre-K data, 2011-2012

“It takes a village to raise a child.”

Parents’ early reading and teaching practices help children develop the skills needed to succeed in school. But parents cannot do it by themselves. In Memphis, many families struggle to provide for their children. Poverty, low levels of social support, and high levels of parental stress place these children at risk for behavioral problems and reduced cognitive outcomes.³²

Participating in pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) and other high-quality early education and childcare (Head Start, for example) can help parents provide important educational experiences for young children. Research has demonstrated that these programs not only prepare children for kindergarten, but also set them on a path to continued success in school and reduce their risk of negative outcomes.^{33,34} In Memphis, children who attend MCS Pre-K, Head Start, or another structured child care center arrive at kindergarten more ready than children who spent the year before kindergarten at home with a relative.³⁵

Over the last six years Memphis City Schools has responded to these needs by more than doubling the number of Pre-K slots – from 1,800 in 2005 to over 4,100 today (including 1,400 combined MCS Pre-K and Head Start slots).

Still, there are more eligible children than available slots. Because of this discrepancy, students who are at greatest risk for academic challenges are given top priority for enrollment. MCS determines this risk through developmental screening and assessment of family risk factors. Extensive research on early childhood development has identified many risk factors associated with reaching kindergarten unprepared.^{4,36-38}

These risk factors include:

- Growing up in a family that struggles financially
- Teenage motherhood
- Parents with less than a high school education
- Having only one parent at home
- Difficulty with language

Most children who apply for MCS Pre-K have 1 or 2 family risk factors.

Among the 3,644 families who applied for MCS Pre-K the 2011-2012 school year, only 14 percent had none of these family risk factors, while 71 percent of families had 1 or 2 risk factors (FIGURE 6). Despite these struggles, these parents took an important step to help their children succeed by signing them up for Pre-K.

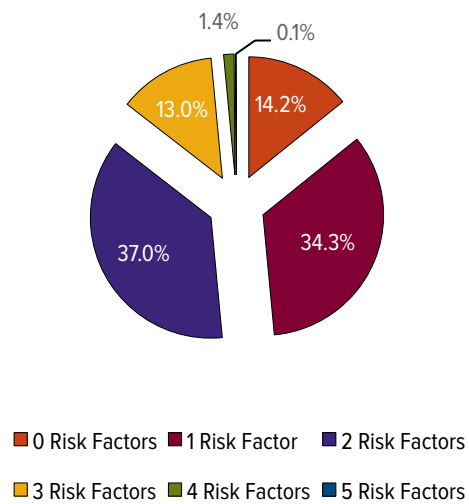


FIGURE 6:
Percent of Children
by Number of
Family Risk Factors

Source: Memphis City
Schools (MCS), Office of
Research & Evaluation,
Pre-K data, 2011-2012

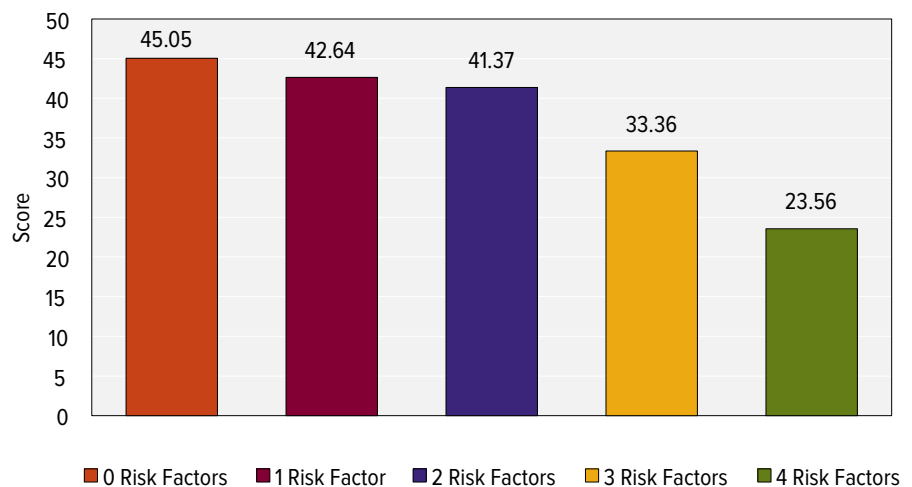
Children with fewer family risks perform better on developmental assessments.

In addition to assessing family risk among children applying for Pre-K, MCS also screens for developmental delays using the Brigance Screening II, a valid and reliable measure of skills in four key areas—physical motor development, social-emotional development, language development, and acquired knowledge.^{39,40}

Brigance scores range from 0 to 100 points,³⁹ but on average these children scored below 50 even if they had no family risk factors. (FIGURE 7) Furthermore, scores tended to be lower for children with more family risk factors. (Since only three children had all 5 family risk factors, they were not included in this analysis.)

FIGURE 7:
Brigance Screening
Score by Number
of Family Risk
Factors

Source: Memphis City
Schools (MCS), Office of
Research & Evaluation,
Pre-K data, 2011-2012



Clearly, children whose families applied for MCS Pre-K have great potential to benefit from the quality educational experiences offered. Moreover, those who could not be offered a spot in a MCS Pre-K (due to limited capacity) will likely arrive at kindergarten less prepared to succeed unless they find other high-quality services.

While there are other high-quality options for preschool experiences, there are not enough slots available for all children. Shelby County currently only offers some combination of Head Start or Pre-K to 7,400 children each year, which is roughly half of the estimated 14,000 3- and 4-year-olds in Shelby County living in poverty.

There are other childcare and early education programs in Shelby County, but availability, location, and cost of high-quality programs are often barriers to low-income families and their children.³² Overall, our community has seen an increase in the availability of quality early educational care. However, many young children are still left unserved and more efforts at multiple levels are needed to break the cycle of poverty through early education.

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